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Doomsday Delayed: USAF Strategic Weapons Doctrine and SIOP-62, 1959–1962: Two Cautionary Tales

William Burr

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**Doomsday Delayed: USAF Strategic Weapons
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viet Union makes it imperative that we develop a better understanding of Reagan's actual strategy in dealing with the Soviet Union. This book not only puts one figuratively in the room with Reagan and his advisers as they discuss policy but also, using excerpts from his personal diary, which was not shared at that time with his staff, gives the reader direct insight into Reagan's mindset. A clear picture emerges of how decisions were made on matters that interested Reagan (not every issue did) and demonstrates that he was anything but a tool of his staff or of his right-wing supporters.

The impression one gets of Soviet policy in the Andersons' book is a reflection of how that policy was perceived in the Reagan White House. We can now see, with the information available from Soviet archives and the testimony of Soviet officials at the time, that Reagan's perception was not always accurate. Even so, this book demolishes the false narrative portraying Reagan as the destroyer of Communism and the Soviet Union. The book also makes clear that by concentrating on developing trust rather than giving exclusive attention to the details of arms control Reagan and Gorbachev succeeded in ending the arms race after their predecessors, who also had that aim, failed.

Reagan's Secret War will be an essential source for scholars researching the diplomacy that brought the Cold War to an end. They may find additional detail in still unpublished documents at the Reagan Presidential Library, but they are unlikely to find anything that contradicts the central message the authors convey. The Andersons have served historians of the Cold War well with their judicious selection and informed commentary.



John H. Rubel, *Doomsday Delayed: USAF Strategic Weapons Doctrine and SIOP-62, 1959–1962: Two Cautionary Tales*. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2009. 306 pp.

Reviewed by William Burr, National Security Archive, George Washington University

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when crises over Berlin and Cuba threatened U.S.-Soviet military confrontations and the possibility of nuclear war, the U.S. government sought, in the name of deterrence, to improve its capabilities to wage war with the Soviet Union. Nuclear-armed B-52 bombers went on airborne alert, the Pentagon requested hundreds of Minuteman rapid-reaction intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and U.S. policymakers approved war plans based on enormously destructive nuclear strikes against the Soviet bloc. The title of this brief but fascinating and thoughtful memoir by former defense official John H. Rubel conveys the danger that he saw at the time, with some of the threat coming from the home front. His account of the early Minuteman ICBM program and the first Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) plan for nuclear war with the Soviet bloc shows how the preferences of military commanders for preemptive nuclear options helped create a risk for accidental nuclear war that Rubel tried to reduce.

From a position as a senior scientist at Hughes Aircraft in California, Rubel went

to work as a high-level official in the Office of the Director, Defense Research and Engineering (DDRE), serving under both Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy. At DDRE, Rubel oversaw the fledgling Minuteman program, which, to his dismay, had a launch system requiring that 50 missiles be fired at once, something that could be done “without the least prior notice.” The two-person crew in the launch-control center could even manipulate a clock-operated switch and fire the missiles. Worse yet, flaws in the electrical system made an accidental launch possible. The Strategic Air Command’s desire for “go/no-go” arrangements that would allow Minuteman to be launched quickly helps to explain why the U.S. Air Force sought technologies conducive to rapid action. Rubel later saw this as a potential “Doomsday Machine,” but Air Force leaders resisted any changes in Minuteman launch procedures until senior Defense Department officials forced solutions. Rubel was confronting the risk of accidental nuclear war that, analysts like Bruce Blair later argued, inhered in the highly sophisticated warning systems and rapid-reaction missile deployments that characterized U.S. and Russian nuclear postures.

Rubel’s extraordinary account of the first SIOP briefing to senior civilian defense officials—he was among them—will be familiar to readers of Fred Kaplan’s 1983 book *Wizards of Armageddon* (Rubel was one of Kaplan’s sources) and the work of David Alan Rosenberg. The SIOP, which could be enacted preemptively, involved strikes against Soviet-bloc territory with thousands of nuclear weapons that would produce hundreds of millions of fatalities. The strikes would target China and other Communist countries even if they were not in the war, prompting Marine Corps Commandant General David Shoup to make a memorable comment: “Any plan that murdered three hundred million Chinese when it might not even be their war is not a good plan. That is not the American way” (p. 29).

The absurd features of SIOP-62 sparked demands by senior Kennedy administration officials for changes that would give the president more plausible options than all-or-nothing. This was more difficult than Rubel suggests; many years passed before a U.S. president had less than “all-out” options, although it was not long before an option existed to exclude China and other countries from the attack plans. Nevertheless, by forcing a restructuring of the Minuteman launch mechanism to permit a “controlled response,” Rubel and like-minded Pentagon officials may have reduced the threat of accidental SIOP execution.

Citing Eisenhower’s farewell address warning of the threat posed by a “scientific-technological elite,” Rubel shows that elements of the elite could undo the damage caused by peers who more willingly acquiesced in military preferences. Nevertheless, vestiges of the first SIOP inhere in the hundreds of high-alert Minuteman ICBMs deployed in the Northern Plains. Moreover, nuclear proliferation multiplies the risk of weak command-and-control systems typified by the early Minuteman and “possibilities of miscalculation, accidental or deliberate preemption . . . , or the escalation of a larval regional conflict into global catastrophe” (p. xi).

Today’s dangers, Rubel argues, make wise action by elites essential to reduce the risk of a doomsday scenario. He does not mention the proposals for abolition of nuclear weapons put forth by old Cold Warriors like George Shultz and Henry Kissinger

that were surfacing when he was preparing this book in 2007, proposals later endorsed by presidential candidate (and now President) Barack Obama. Supporters of abolition and critics of nuclear policy can point to this book as supporting evidence, especially the arguments about proliferation dangers. Nevertheless, as the author reminds us, there are no guarantees that anything can be learned from history.

Rubel's account of an extraordinary period in U.S. nuclear history has good potential for use in courses on the nuclear age and the Cold War. The book could have used a little more editorial work before publication; for example, the lack of transitional sentences or paragraphs for the discussion of World War II bombing strategy and casualties on page 2 interrupts the narrative flow at an important point.



Brian E. Birdnow, *Communism, Anti-Communism, and the Federal Courts in Missouri, 1952–1958: The Trial of the St. Louis Five*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005. 219 pp. \$109.95.

Reviewed by James G. Ryan, Texas A&M University at Galveston

This book is a competent local study of a national phenomenon: the Justice Department's attempt to destroy the American Communist Party (CPUSA) in the 1950s. The principal weapon, the Smith Act of 1940, prohibited membership in any organization deemed to advocate the violent overthrow of the U.S. government. Prosecutors relied on the law when indicting the party's entire national board in 1948. Eleven of the board's twelve members were convicted the following year, convictions upheld in 1951 by the Supreme Court in its decision *Eugene Dennis et al. v United States*. A rush ensued to prosecute other CPUSA leaders throughout the land.

Brian Birdnow rightly emphasizes that historians have largely neglected such regional crusades, and his introduction terms the St. Louis proceedings "prototypical" (p. 2) because, in many ways, they were. He narrates the trial process clearly and effectively. A notable conceptual strength of the book is its treatment of "political justice." Birdnow rightly employs the term, which the legal historian Michal R. Belknap and others have used when highlighting the limits of dissent in Cold War America. Birdnow displays no hesitation in stressing that "from 1946 to 1955, the United States government clearly used the Smith Act to harass and paralyze the domestic Communist movement" (p. 165). The book's mere existence represents no small achievement—the back cover reveals that Birdnow was stuck on the historical profession's notorious adjunct faculty treadmill during its entire writing.

Despite Birdnow's laudable pluck, he displays questionable judgment when he argues that "no discernible Cold War hysteria existed in St. Louis" (p. 150) during the eighteen-week trial. He emphasizes that the judge generally excused the defendants "from naming the names of other alleged Communists" (p. 153). Other evidence, however, suggests a quite different interpretation. Local newspapers, both conservative and liberal, agreed that authorities originally set bail so high that the working-class de-